HACK

Sex, Drugs, and Scandal from Inside the Tabloid Jungle

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Beast of Bodmin: The Build-Up

I was stood at a grey, deserted desk not far from the Editor's office, worriedly flipping through some dailies. Saturday evening, the paper put to bed. Newsroom eerily quiet. But I didn't fancy going home – the stress levels in Watford had now reached the same as at work. My relationship had broken down and I was desperately waiting to do one into the new Dockland's pad that I was buying.

A slight tension gripped my shoulders – I hadn't had a story for a week, the last one being the car-ringing gangster. A recurrent viral infection, triggered by stress over the last six months, had also been making me angry and depressed. When the delirium hit, I got confused – and manically horny, for some reason. 'What the fuck is going on?' I'd complain, but no one would listen.

'How's it going, Graham?' she cooed, like a Warrington-version of Jessica Rabbit. The fragrant Rebekah Wade was stood at my side. Panicky, I stood to attention.

'Much on?' she asked, flicking absently through a roughed-up copy of that day's *Daily Telegraph* on the bench.

On paper, Rebekah Wade should have been sexy. Tall and slim, an English rose with a killer streak, deadly as nightshade. But in the flesh she was strangely sexless, her femininity scraped barren by a corporate zealotry incongruous with her alabaster skin and floral prints. Rebekah Wade was, in my view anyway, the type of person who gave capitalism a bad name.

Not that I was perving off her. When being addressed by Rebekah, it was essential to mask whatever thoughts you had with the ‘right attitude’. Free thinking, reflection and creativity were put to one side. A narrow set of *News of the World* views was acceptable – an unnatural process that led to mental turbulence. Brainwashing the polite and professional way is the subject of much research in Jeff Schmidt’s book *Disciplined Minds.* It takes a critical look at salaried professionals and the soul-battering system that shapes their lives. In this unusual one-to-one with Rebekah, the right attitude was obedience. Servile gratitude that she had singled me out for her pet project.

‘I’m trying to work up some good investigation ideas for next week,’ I replied, trying to look busy. Rebekah pointed at a page lead in the *Telegraph.* ‘What about this?’ she said. ‘A sighting of the Beast of Bodmin Moor by 15 Cornish councillors on a bus.’

‘Wow!’ I said, marvelling at her genius for spotting it. ‘Great story!’ Speed-reading it, but like an exam question that won’t go in, getting nervous in proximity of power. Worried in case she thought me unworthy, I immediately began blagging her that I happened to be a bit of a Beast expert.

‘Yes,’ I announced, ‘when I worked at the agency, one of the snappers got a picture of a big cat down there, silhouetted against the moonlight and all that. Big story – the *Sun* splashed on it.’

The flames in her eyes roared up like gas jets. Of all the desires that consumed Rebekah’s extreme ambition – that’s what she craved most. Editorship of the *Currant.* But first she had to impress Rupert. Prove that she could handle the warm-up Sunday hot seat. Before being let loose on the cash cow that had serviced his acquisition debt for 30 years. Bankrolling BSkyB. War-chesting his imperial campaign in the US. No one could be allowed to fuck that up.

‘The Hound of the Baskervilles,’ she said. Thin lips curling up at the end like the Joker. ‘Fog rolling across the moors, mysterious howls in the night... I like it.’

‘Yes, the smuggler’s caves, Agatha Christie, pirates,’ I babbled. ‘I know Cornwall well. I did my training down there for a couple of years – spooky place.’

Bigging up my authority but digging a hole at the same time. All true by the way – I’d started off my journalistic career as a £90-a-week trainee at

the tiny *Falmouth Packet* newspaper, whilst doing my NCTJ course at Camborne College near Truro. The question was – was it about to end down there as well?

'I want you to go down to Cornwall,' Rebekah suddenly ordered, 'and do a story on the Beast. You never know . . .' She smiled knowingly. 'There could be something in it – these are councillors after all, so they're hardly nutters. And look at this picture of a paw print,' handing me the *Telegraph.* And sure enough, there was a moody pic of a shape in a bit of mud.

'The councillors might have been pissed,' I said. Silence, like a Cheshire frost settling over the upmarket village she'd been brought up in. I'd clearly exceeded my banter.

Rebekah then mentioned a series of pieces that the paper had done on UFOs, a kind of real life *X-Files.*

'Our readers loved it,' she went on, as though she had unearthed some hidden truth about the workers that Karl Marx had overlooked.

'Remember your spooky vampire story, on the front – I think we were up that week.' Meaning that circulation figures had risen. 'People loved it.'

The first thing you learn about news executives is their complete ignorance of their readers. Readers, disparagingly referred to as punters, were imagined to be peasants with very basic levels of reason. No one really knew, because Wapping was cut off from the rest of the world, and reporters ate their sandwiches at their desks. The Chief Executive Les Hinton lived in a fairytale enclave of Wapping known as 'deep carpet land'. Where the wages were just as unbelievable. The waistcoats had colourful patterns on them. And the corporate slack flowed in abundance. Below him, the Editor moved between his subjects, on the other side of the high camera'ed-up walls, in a chauffeur-driven limo.

However, what was thought to be known was that punters were to be titillated with royal stories and celebrities. And distracted from important issues that affected their lives by unexplained phenomena such as UFOs, ghosts and phantom beasts. Confused by what Marcus Aurelius described as 'miracle-workers and jugglers' who talked about 'incantations and the driving away of daemons and such things'. Horoscopes and make-overs bulged out of the new lifestyle sections. Of course, the biggest distraction of all was the sport on the back pages. The Premier League was the modern equivalent of what the Roman's called 'bread and circuses'. The gladiators and chariot races that superficially appeased shallow citizens. But the irony

was that readers were still the biggest single mystery to the management. Even to the New Labour-style focus groups that the Soho agencies were billing them for.

Rebekah piped up again with another stroke of genius: ‘I want you to get dressed up as Sherlock Holmes and I want you to investigate these unexplained mysteries. I want you to go to the Himalayas and find out about the Yeti. Has the trail gone cold on Lord Lucan? Is he still alive? I don’t know. I want to know. Is there a monster in Loch Ness? I want you to go there and see. And whereabouts is Shergar? Is he still alive somewhere?’

Shergar? The Derby-winner that was kidnapped by the IRA. Machine-gunned to death in a stable and turned into dog food. No, he was definitely not on this plane. But she was on one – there was no stopping her now.

‘Firstly, however,’ she said, ‘I want you to go to the moors in Cornwall and do a number on the Beast.’

Who was going to tell her that these things aren’t real? I looked around. A few weary reporters had come back from Henry’s Wine Bar, after the customary pint between off-stone and first editions’ dropping. They had had their heads down. No one wanted to break the bad news – Father Christmas didn’t exist.

‘What the fuck was that all about?’ Hadn’t noticed, but Ray had been nervously eagle-eyeing us *Goodfellas*-style from behind his venetians. But not having the bottle to interrupt us. When the coast was clear, he darted over.

‘What was she saying to you?’ he half-whispered. Shadily, looking from side to side, like a street dealer in one of my stories. For the first time I could sense vulnerability in him.

‘She wants me to go down to Cornwall and take a look at the Beast of Bodmin.’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ he seethed, backing up. It was obvious that Ray was deeply fearful that Rebekah was taking too much of a shine to my good self. But I didn’t play him for it. I was still an office politics Bambi. And in the jungle, Ray was still a big beast.

‘The Beast of fucking Bodmin. Are you taking the piss?’ he wretched.

‘No, and I’ve got to go dressed up as Sherlock Holmes, with a cape on and all that.’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake.’ More emotional this time, shaking his head in denial. As though I’d told him that the economy was collapsing or

something and that we'd all have to head for the mountains. 'What the fuck is that all about?'

'I don't know. She said it's part of a big series – she wants to send me to the Himalayas to investigate the Yeti. Go after the Loch Ness Monster, Shergar, Lord Lucan – the works, mate.'

The word 'mate', a little slight assertion of my new status.

'No way – you sure?'

'Yes way,' I said.

I allowed a measure of gloating to rise to the surface. Rebekah was putting me in the know instead of him. Was she teaching the Great Raymondo a lesson? Had he fucked up in some way that I wasn't aware of? Either way, in Fleet Street terms, this was my big break. Even though I found the whole idea of dressing up as Sherlock Holmes for Rebekah gimpish and humiliating. There was a whole history of arsehole reporters dressing up as chickens or Mr Blobby or whatever for daft stories. I was always of the opinion that it demeaned the status of my illustrious profession. Especially me – I was a serious, hard-hitting investigative reporter. Booting in doors. Taking names. Crusading for Truth and Justice. Not some fucking work experience kid in a panto costume

'Well, who the fuck's going to be Dr Watson then?' asked Ray.

'Elementary, mate – you are.' I knew I was pushing it. But it'd been a gruelling Saturday and taking the piss was fair game.

At least he laughed. 'Fuck off. It'll have to be Ricky,' he said.

Ricky Sutton was a contract freelancer who'd just been poached from the *Sunday Mirror.* He went on to get famous for being the reporter who got into *Blue Peter* presenter Richard Bacon on a night out. Then turning him over for cocaine.

'OK, I'll talk to Ricky. You hire the costumes. And talk to Pictures to see who they're sending.'